

Virginia Department of Health
DIVISION OF ENVIRONMENTAL EPIDEMIOLOGY

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Lead Poisoning from Folk Home Remedies

What is lead poisoning?

Lead is a very toxic substance which can cause serious health problems when swallowed or inhaled as a dust. Even when ingested in very small amounts, lead can cause stomach pain, constipation, headaches, and mental difficulties. In large doses, lead can cause seizures, coma, and even death. Lead poisoning can occur in both children and adults, but is more common and dangerous in children. Even children who appear healthy can have dangerous levels of lead in their body.

What are folk home remedies?

Folk home remedies are traditional medicines used by folk healers to treat common ailments. Many cultures, including Hispanic, East Indian, Middle Eastern, and West- or Southeast-Asian, use folk remedies that contain herbs, minerals, and metals. Several of these folk remedies contain lead because it is believed to be useful in treating various ailments. Herbal and folk remedies are not under the control of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Therefore, the government does not regulate these remedies or their ingredients. Most of these remedies are manufactured outside of the United States and imported into this country. They are then provided by folk healers (*curanderas*), or are offered for sale in ethnic grocery stores, neighborhood shops, or flea markets. Often these home remedies are carried into the United States by travelers visiting their families in other countries. Traditional medicines are passed through generations, and are administered by family members and parents to children.

What are some common folk remedies that contain lead?

Two of the most common folk remedies that contain lead are Greta and Azarcon. These are traditional Hispanic remedies used to treat *empacho*, i.e., colic, upset stomach, vomiting, or constipation. They are yellow to orange powders and can contain as much as 90% lead. Ghasard, an Indian folk remedy, is a brown powder used to help digestion. Bala goli and Kandu are used by the Asian Indian community to treat stomachache. Ba-baw-san is a Chinese herbal remedy used to treat colic in children. Pay-loo-ah is a red powder used in Southeast Asian countries to treat children with rash or high fever. Kohl and Surma are black powders used in India and Middle Eastern countries mainly as a cosmetic, but also as a medicine to treat skin infections or the navel of a newborn child. Litargirio is a powder that has been used as a deodorant, a foot fungicide, and as a treatment for burns and wound healing by people from the Dominican Republic.

How do I know if a folk remedy contains lead?

You cannot tell by looking at or tasting a folk remedy if it contains lead. Only a laboratory test can determine if a remedy contains lead. Many remedies in use have not been tested.

Are children more susceptible to folk remedies containing lead?

Lead is known to affect the nervous system in children and adults. In infants and young children, the brain and nerves are still developing and are much more susceptible to the dangers of lead. Since many of these folk remedies contain high levels of lead, even small amounts can be very harmful. Pregnant women should not use these remedies. Lead can affect the development of the unborn child. Breastfeeding women can also transfer lead from these remedies through the breast milk to the baby.

What do I do if my child or I have taken folk remedies containing lead?

If you believe that you or your child has taken a folk remedy that contains lead, contact your physician or health care provider. A physician can perform a blood lead test to determine if lead levels require further treatment. Most adults and children with elevated lead levels show no outward symptoms. As the blood lead levels increase, so does the lead's effect on your health.

Are folk remedies containing lead found in Virginia?

It is difficult to determine how widespread the use of remedies containing lead is within our state. The usage of these remedies is based on deep-rooted traditions within close-knit cultural communities. In Virginia, several cases of elevated lead levels have been linked to the usage of folk remedies.

How can I get more information on folk remedies containing lead?

You can contact the Virginia Department of Health, Division of Environmental Epidemiology at 804-864-8182 if you need further information on folk home remedies. You may also contact your local health department for assistance with blood lead testing or call Lead Safe Virginia toll free at 877-668-7987.

Virginia Department of Health
Division of Environmental Epidemiology
January 24, 2008

Related links:

www.epa.gov/lead/index.html
www.vahealth.org/leadsafe/